

Leveling up 681

Chapter 681: Swarm Devastation

You couldn't make it? The dwarf arched his brows.

It was a difficult decision to make, but Dallion decided he couldn't risk putting something of the sort in the hands of others. There was no definite proof that the weapon was meant for Aspan, which was why Dallion placed an echo within the item. Up to now, he had avoided the practice, but unusual times required unusual solutions.

Couldn't defeat the last guardian, Dallion said. I've still a thing or two to learn about magic.

That wasn't exactly a lie. Dallion had gone to the final segment of the artifact and used Nox to summon the guardian. The creature had turned out to be a five-headed hydra. Dallion had never faced one in person, but knew enough about it from the bestiary tome Eleria had given him. It was a tough creature to defeat, though not impossible for someone like him. Instead of doing so, he had waited for the creature to attack, after which he had used combat splitting to complete five guard sequences in a row and escaped the realm.

I can finish it some other time. It was a risk to use his music skills so openly, but Dallion had no choice. Concentrating, he added a subtle note of reluctance in his word, causing the dwarf to have second thoughts.

I guess it's okay, six levels is better than none.

You're taking it well enough.

The dwarf's fingers danced over the item. Magic symbols appeared, quickly forming a pattern. A triple circle took shape, then quickly shrank to the size of a coin and burned into the hilt of the dagger. All but the tip of the blade lit up, straightening into a rather long stiletto.

Six levels is fine. The dwarf smiled. Your debt is settled.

Good to know. Dallion turned around.

Wait! Don't you want your gift?

Normally, Dallion would be all about taking rewards. Knowing that he was the one who had deliberately botched the job, though, made him a bit more humble than usual.

I thought that was only if I got the job done?

eh, you hurt me! Would I be so unfair? Here, this is for you. He handed Dallion a single die of purple crystal. It's a catcher crystal. Since you're aunter I thought it could be useful.

Catcher crystal The general had given Dallion something similar a while ago in order to capture a cloud creature. By the looks of it, he had gotten it from here in one way or another. The thought sent chills down Dallion's spine. He was well aware that the general's network spread throughout Wétie province and a bit beyond, but he never imagined it would reach all the way here. He could see it happen, though. There were many things that mages weren't good at, including item exploration and improvement. All it took was for the general to offer such a service, and mages would be more than willing to make a deal. They didn't care how or where the job got done, just that it did.

Where did you get this? Dallion asked.

Made it myself. The dwarf said proudly. All it took is a bit of

The ground trembled violently, causing several shelves to crash onto the floor. The dwarf and his daughter followed. The only reason that Dallion kept his balance was because his reaction trait was above fifty.

From what he had seen so far, this world was lacking any seismic activity. For that reason, if there was a tremor, there had to be a much more immediate and nearby reason, and it never was good. Using his athletic skills, Dallion grabbed each of the dwarves, then rushed out of the shop. Barely had he done so when the whole structure collapsed into the ground behind him.

What the heck? Dallion split into instances. Several of them kept on running forward as fast as he could manage. One, though, turned around to see what had happened.

A swarm of shardflies had risen into the air like a cone, coming from the very hole that had swallowed the dwarfs shop. That was not all. Dallion was able to see several more swarms of insects. Thankfully, they were in areas between building clusters.

Shardfly nests? He wondered. Why were there more than one?

Mages were everywhere. The apprentices were running for safety, while the more seasoned mages were in the sky casting multi-spells to contain the situation. Against so many insects, theyd need every bit of help they could get. One in a gray robe with the insignia of a white eye swooped down towards Dallion. Casting a series of spells, he lifted Dallion and the dwarves into the air, then snatched them as he flew by.

Dont struggle, a male voice said.

White Eye, Dallion thought. For once, he was glad that they had kept an eye on him. This was the time for the faction to prove its worth.

Was there anyone else inside? the mage asked.

No, Dallion replied. Not that I know of.

Lets hope so. The mages hood fell back, revealing a gorgons head. Snakes moved around, forming magic symbols. Within moments, a series of aether spheres formed around the group, protecting them from external influences.

Youre a gorgon?

Did you think your faction was the only one? Youve got a lot to learn.

In retrospect, it was quite obvious. The White Moon Emion, was the patron of gorgons. Only a faction of gorgon mages would call themselves that.

What happened when you were in there? the gorgon asked.

Nothing much. We were discussing a deal when the ground shook.

Dont lie to me, novice.

Thats what happened! I thought it was an explosion, so I grabbed them and went out as quickly as I could.

And you did nothing to trigger it?

If I did, I dont know what.

The snakes on the gorgons head moved about. Dallion had lived long enough with a gorgon to know that was an expression of annoyance.

Your pass has been revoked, the gorgon stated. Remain in the Learning Hall.

Dallion was then briskly dropped off at the entrance, after which the mage flew off, taking the levitating dwarves with him.

Nil, whats going on? Dallion asked, looking at the chaos that had befallen this area of the Academy.

Best go inside, dear boy, the old echo said. I havent seen this much commotion in a long time.

But what happened?

Some experiment or research project mustnt have gone as planned. It happens on occasion, unfortunately. The Academy will get to the bottom of this, after which there will be a massive reshuffle.

That sounded oddly bureaucratic in a terrifying sort of way.

Dal? a familiar voice asked. His black-haired classmate approached, also making his way from the outside. I see Im not the only one going for a stroll. You look different.

This is how I normally look. With Dallion being in his current form, his classmate was half his height. That didnt prevent him from having higher magic. From what one could estimate, he had to be a level twelve, at least. You okay?

Just a few scratches. You have a he pointed at Dallions shoulder.

Oh, thats just Ruby. He closes his wings when on me. Safer that way.

Right. So, shall we go inside?

In a bit. I want to see whats going on.

I dont think that's a good idea. The black-haired frowned. He still remained there, looking at the mages efforts to deal with the situation.

For nearly all-powerful beings, they managed to simultaneously be highly efficient and absolutely disorganized. There didnt seem to be any cooperation between any two mages, and yet they seemed to be at all the right place at the right time. Some weird swarm level communication was going on. The issue was that Dallion couldnt see combat splitting being used, and there didnt seem to be any magic threads linking the mages, either.

The situation on the ground had been contained, and not only the shardflies were an issue. The insects had scattered, filling the entire sky above the Academy like leaves in a torrent. At first Dallion was concerned that all of them might be killed off, but by the looks of it, the mages were more interested in dazing and capturing the creatures than doing any harm.

This is getting boring. The black-haired turned around after a few minutes. Im going inside.

Ill join you. Dallion said. There was little more to see anyway, so he followed the noble inside. The moment he stepped through the threshold, he shrank back to his child form. The experience still felt uncomfortable, even after so many times.

The corridors were full of panicking apprentices running about. People were shouting that the underground had to be checked and reinforced in case of issues.

Dining room, the black-haired said.

Dallion nodded.

Walking against the wall, the two made their way to the novices dining room. The place was all but deserted, and a welcome change from the noise and panic abundant in the rest of the Learning Hall. To make things even better, there was food there as well.

Why were you out there? the black-haired asked, fetching a jug of lemonade and two glasses.

I was improving my magic, Dallion said. I thought Id visit a shop or two to check things out. Way too expensive for me to afford anything.

You should have told me. The noble poured two glasses and gave one of them to Dallion. Id have bought whatever you wanted. I dont think there was anything good, though. Weapons and medallions are useful in the wilderness, not so much in realms or vortexes.

You know about vortexes. Dallion took a sip. The drink tasted pleasantly bitter sweet.

Of course I know. My echoes wouldnt be doing their job if they didnt tell me about them. Is that how you boosted your magic trait?

Yeah.

Cool, cool. What are you at?

Nine.

Could be better. One more level and youre ready to go.

Ill get it in the experience trial next week.

Dont take too long. If you dont get it next week, Cheska and I will be moving to rank three without you.

The noble was being quite serious. In the event of failure, Dallion would be left behind. Hopefully, it wasnt going to come to that. After learning over a hundred symbols, it came time for the first experience trials.

Dallion spent weeks preparing in his realm, and not only in drawing symbols but also developing his combat techniques. Nil was absolutely delighted, as was Harp to a certain extent. Yet Dallion

himself still felt he was lacking in many areas. At one point, he even attempted another of his awakening trials, just to see how much he'd improved. Once the battle was over, he saw that it wasn't nearly as much as he would have liked.

Relax, dear boy, it'll be an easy trial, Nil said. The Academy wants you to progress, despite what they claim in class. They wouldn't come up with something that difficult, so you can't succeed. At most, it'll be a vortex guardian that's less tough than anything you've faced so far.

In part, that was precisely what Dallion feared. With the other two class champions automatically getting promoted to rank three, he'd be the first to take part in a trial. And from what the fury instructor had said, it was anyone's guess what that trial might be. Dallion could face a creature just as he could be forced to solve some ridiculous puzzle. In theory, he had the skills and experience to master everything they threw at him, and yet there was the constant grain of doubt at the back of his mind.

You'll be joining me in this one, Ruby, Dallion said as he was about to leave for class. It might be tough, though.

Cool, the shardfly replied, laconic as usual, and fluttered onto Dallion's shoulder.

Okay, then. Let's get through this.

Chapter 682: The Vortex Cage Trial

The exam room was in a different part of the novice section. It was rather large, mixing elements of an awakened training room, an auditorium, and a small arena. Knee-length walls separated four sections of the floor, marking the trial zones.

Take the top row, Palag pointed at a set of seats. Dal, you go down to zone one.

Dallion swallowed. He could feel a tightness in his chest.

It's just a silly trial! He kept repeating to himself. He hadn't felt so tense when he had fought in the arena of Nerosal.

While he faces the challenge, I want all of you to carefully observe everything going on, the fury continued. Everything he does right, everything he does wrong. Remember, you'll be going through this as well if you want to progress to rank three. The point is not only to learn through your mistakes, but from the mistakes of others as well.

His prep talk could use some work, the armadil shield said. Then again, he's a fury. They always had a thing for others' failure.

Upon arriving at the edge of the zone, Dallion hesitated. Should he just step over it? Splitting into two instances, he did. Nothing happened.

Dallion. The fury cast a spell, causing a large aether cube, the size of a small chest, to materialize in the air. Your goal is simple. The cube gently levitated down, landing in the middle of Dallion's trial zone. Complete the trial. In order to start, all you need to do is have some of your magic interact with the cube.

That's all? Dallion asked.

That is all.

Do I have a time limit to complete the trial?

A thin smile emerged on Palags face.

You can take as long as you like. Yet the magic of the trial will constantly evaporate. If you take too long, the amount of magic wont be enough to boost your trait by a level.

Cunning. There was a time limit, but it wasnt imposed by the instructor. The explanation was a trick to make novices feel that it was all in their hands, and while it very much was, there certainly were methods to ensure that the magic didnt evaporate.

Dallion took a deep breath and slowly stepped up to the cube. The size was outright impressive. He could see thousands of mana threads inside, tangled in a series of complicated knots. For a moment, he glanced back at his classmates. All of them were there, even Cheska and Raven.

When did you show up?

Dallion wondered.

There was no need for them to be here, although Dallion could see the benefit. This would be their first time seeing such a trial, although when it came to the black-haired, one could never be certain.

The moment Dallions hand came in contact with the crystal, the cube swallowed him in. It felt like being sucked into a new space and it very much was just that.

VORTEX CAGE LEVEL 1

A purple rectangle appeared.

You are in a VORTEX CAGE.

Solve the riddle to ABSORB the vortex.

You have 20 minutes before the VORTEX becomes too weak to absorb.

The rectangles were a nice touch, making it feel like a standard trial. However, Dallion could see what it really was: a prison realm, just like the one the general had given him. Thats why it worked exclusively on magic creatures. No doubt the standard version didnt decay, keeping its captive inside for an infinite amount of time. Or even if it did, the rate of decay was so slow that it would hold prisoners years before it needed replacement.

Dallion, Palags voice snapped him back to reality. Time is wasting.

This was another disconcerting aspect of the cube: it allowed the captive to look out as well as others to look in. Bursting into instances, Dallion summoned his harpsisword, then went about exploring the vortex cage.

The area was rather small, no larger than a standard twenty-by-twenty-foot room. There were no creatures or monsters. Most would consider that good. Not Dallion, though. With his skills, a direct fight would have been far more to his advantage.

Looking at the floor, there were a few spell patternsnothing that Dallion could decipherand a large number of magic threads that went along the entire surface of the cube like iron bars.

A puzzle, Dallion thought. They set me up with a puzzle.

Back on Earth, he enjoyed watching people solve escape rooms the same as any other person, although he couldn't say he was particularly good at it.

The obvious choice was to use his spark to cut through the magic threads. Charging up his harpsisword, Dallion did a three-sixty line attack. The attack worked so well that it shattered the vortex completely, earning him no reward whatsoever. Thankfully, all that had been done in an instance allowing Dallion to pretend it never happened.

One word of advice, the fury instructor said. Do not use items that would destroy the trial cube itself. That is not considered an acceptable solution and will gain you nothing other than a few stern words by my mage.

Thanks for sharing, windbag! Dallion grumbled mentally. He unsummoned his harpsisword. If he couldn't use weapons, he had to focus on the things he could, namely magic symbols.

His first thought was to draw the matter symbol and just to see what would happen. Out of habit, he drew it in a way to make gold. The floor changed appropriately, transforming into the precious metal.

There was an initial boost of dopamine and euphoria, though that quickly faded as Dallion found that he was lacking the most important question: what exactly was he supposed to do?

Am I supposed to escape? he asked.

That's part of the trial, Palag replied. Figure out what you're supposed to do and then do it as efficiently as possible.

As useless as a trial echo, Dallion grumbled mentally, only to get a chorus of disapproval from his realm.

Splitting into a hundred instances, he drew all the symbols he knew on one of the walls. Most of them had little effect, but there were two that had rather unexpected effects. One was the light symbol. Dallion expected the entire wall to light up. Instead, only the magic threads did so. What was more, different parts of the threads glowed in different intensities.

The other symbol that worked was the temperature one, more specifically the cold aspect of the symbol.

Any point asking for assistance, Nil? Dallion tried to pull one of the threads, but the layer of purple crystal prevented him from reaching it.

Use what you're learned and follow your intuition, dear boy, the echo replied.

You're worse than Palag. Dallion kept on creating instances.

One of the positives about being able to combat split was that it effectively increased time a hundredfold. The countdown didn't stop, but Dallion got to explore hundreds of options. The trial had become more an exercise in brute force than anything else. Hundreds of Dallions walked up

and down, drawing symbols in different spots. Eventually, logic patterns started to emerge. Drawing a light symbol on a gold floor made it light up. However, drawing a matter symbol on a wall with glowing threads made them shine through.

Intrigued, Dallion followed up by drawing an ice symbol on the material. The wall of gold froze solid to the point that leaning against it was enough to make a hole in the spot.

No, Dallion whispered. You have to be kidding me. He looked at the fury. The annoying smile on the instructors face suggested that Dallions fears were well founded.

Dallion looked back at the wall. Gently, he reached through the hole and pulled out one of the magic threads. The piece of magic extended, though it didnt snap.

That was the riddle: to link the threads according to their intensity. Or, at least, it seemed so. With no other clues to go by, Dallion did just that.

As the minutes decreased, he moved from one part of the room to the other, pulling out threads and linking them together like electric cables. The whole space became a giant maze of cats cradles. Soon Dallion had to use his athletic and acrobatic skills just to navigate the place.

When the final connection was made. The change occurred. There was no rectangle, no warning. All the threads suddenly combined, pulling all the magic into a single ball in the center of the room. Walls, floor, and ceiling shattered as even solid matter broke up into chunks, transforming into pure magic once more.

That was it the solution to the riddle, and the final challenge. Without wasting a second, Dallion dashed towards the glowing sphere and grabbed hold of it.

MAGIC ABSORBED

Your MAGIC trait is now 10

Well done, Dal. Slow clapping came from the upper rows. You have successfully completed this cohorts first experience trial. And not only that, but it seems youve graduated to level three.

Dallion didnt know what to say. He felt glad, but also slightly concerned. The trial had ended up being nothing like he had expected. Looking at the faces of his classmates, many of them were still laughing. Cheska wasnt. She was probably one of those who had grasped the significance of just what had happened. As for Raven, there was no sign of him anymore.

As youve all seen, the trials come in many forms. Maybe youre good at defeating monsters. Maybe youre fast at drawing symbols. In order to become an apprentice, you need to be proficient at everything. Remember, reliability is the key to success. Those who arent reliable amount to nothing more than low-level apprentices at best. If you dont want to end up like that, be diligent and insightful.

The laughter stopped.

Take five minutes to decide wholl take on the next trial. The fury made his way to the rooms entrance. Dallion, a word if I may.

Since arriving at the Academy, Dallion had no idea whether that was a good thing or not. Either way, he was in no position to refuse. Calmly, he made his way up the steps, glancing at Phoel as he

did so. The large boy was making it obvious that he wanted to be the next to go, as his posse was assuring him he'd do way better than Dallion. Cheska, on the other hand, had joined their instructor at the entrance.

This marks our final lesson, Palag said. You're welcome to come watch novice trials, of course, but other than that, I doubt we'll see each other again.

Okay? Dallion wasn't sure what this meant, nor why it was so formal.

From now on, you'll be taught by my mage directly. Try to make a good impression in class. He's not as liberal as I am.

I thought mages don't deal with novices, Dallion said.

Usually they don't, but with several prodigies, Academy mages tend to make exceptions. Oh, and just to let you know, you're not a prodigy, just someone whose experience and talent. Keep that in mind.

Quite the flatterer, the armadil shield said in Dallion's realm. I bet he's quite the romantic on the inside.

Cheska will show you the ropes, Palag went on. As a prodigy, she's been given a few privileges, not to mention she's already got a basic understanding of what's going on.

You've been to rank three classes, haven't you? Dallion asked with a smirk.

Just some of them. The girl replied with false modesty. Rank three is a lot different. We got to learn spells. There are so many of them that we must pick fields. Well, you need to pick fields.

Why just me?

Do you think you can keep up? I picked all of them, of course, but I don't think you'll be able to follow the more complicated ones. A poisonous smile formed on her face. You can always try, though.

I think I will. Dallion smiled back. It was official. With his advancement to rank three, a new rivalry had just begun.

Chapter 683: Rank III Novice

It had been a while since Dallion had visited the novice administration building in the Learning Hall corridor. The staff seemed rather amused by his new appearance, Dealing Dallion with no choice but to smile and endure being treated as an infant.

Here you are, the assistant patted him on the head as she brought a sheet of paper. Just fill that in. Cheska should be able to help you, but if there's anything you can't answer, let me know.

Dallion found the attitude humiliating. Forcing a smile, he went to a far corner of the room and attempted to fill out the sheet.

His name had already been filled out, along with his current trait and skill levels and a large section stating that he was a fully accepted novice rank three. If nothing else, mages liked to be efficient. Underneath were several spellcraft disciplines. The problem was, other than the very first, Dallion had only a vague idea of what the fields entailed.

Problems? Cheska asked. Her tone was confident, but Dallion failed to sense any glee emanating from her.

Spelling? he asked, giving her a weird glance.

Yeah, I know. She stifled a chuckle. I thought it was an Academy joke, at first.

Okay. Ill be learning spelling Dallion wrote down that he wanted to attend that lesson.

An interesting detail was that most of the fields were led by the same mage. Even more peculiar was that often he did so at the same time. From what Cheska had said, the man was an Academy mage and a quite important one at that.

Whats Echo Training? Dallion continued with the next discipline on the list.

One of the boring ones. I just go there to be informed. Its the science of using magic to help your echoes learn skills that you dont know. It sounds quite good until you learn that youre wasting all that magic for nothing.

Do I lose magic levels when I train them?

No. Cheska looked at him, as if hed just stepped in crap. But you still have to gather it. There are so much better things you can use it for than a one off. You dont train all your echoes, just one of them.

That sounded like a catch, though if it could work for echoes, there was a chance it could work for familiars as well, or maybe even linked guardians.

To end the suspense, you wont be able to use them on guardians, Nil said. But when it comes to familiars that take the role of guardians, thats another matter.

Quickly, Dallion jotted his agreement and kept on reading.

The following fieldpotionsalso got an automatic yes. He was already familiar with that without asking. The one after, though, was confusing, to say the least.

Time split dilation? he asked. It was also notable that it was one of the fields that was led by a Grand mage.

Its all about the flow of time in various realms. I dont see the importance, but its interesting to listen. You might like it, since you spend a lot of time in realms.

If you say so. Dallion downplayed the importance. He was quite thrilled by this field. To be honest, he was thrilled by every field so far to the point he was worried that he might not be able to keep up even with his high mind trait.

The next two disciplines were Improvement Trees and Magical Fauna. Both seemed somewhat clear, so Dallion chose to pretend he knew what they were about and indicated he wanted to follow the course, anyway.

You cant choose that. Chesta pointed at the one called Vortex exploration or anything afterwards.

Why not?

They are marked specialized. It means that you need to get approval from a mage to prove you can handle them.

And I suppose you got one, Dallion grumbled to himself. And to think that the really good ones were there as well: Aggression Casting, Healer Magic, Artifact Research, Matlin Creation, Realm Travel

Realm Travel? That seemed innocent at first glance, but considering that any awakened could enter realms, he felt there was a lot more to it, especially since it was considered as one of the advanced courses.

Nil, thats travel between worlds, isnt it?

Some of the disciplines have changed since I was here last. Theres no need to jump to conclusions.

Nil

Yes, the echo admitted. It probably is theoretical research relating to traveling between worlds. Very dangerous, very rule bending. I know youll ignore my advice, but Id stay away from that. Youre not ready for it. And there are many more worlds than the ones you know, worlds not controlled by the Moons. Its believed that a lot of the monsters in the wilderness came from there.

Does that include the uncivilized races?

What do you mean?

Minotaurs, colossuses, ogres

Its possible. Nil hesitated. There are a few races that might never have existed, just fairy tales made up by people living in difficult times.

But some of them might have arrived from another world?

Its a definite possibility, but as I said, its highly theoretical. To be honest, Im astonished that there are so many theoretical fields taught to novices. Most of this should be apprentice stuff. Academia is for those who know what they are doing and can dedicate their lives to going through decades of boring literature and repetitive experiments. Realm Modification is something that would suit novices a lot more. I cant fathom why that has been removed from the list.

Nil kept on rambling, but Dallion was no longer listening. Hed already filled out everything he could fill. It was a lot, considering that for several months he had been learning just to draw and memorize symbols. Yet, it was nothing compared to Cheskas schedule, as she made sure to remind him several times.

Balancing his expression between a smile and a frown, Dallion went to an apprentice at one of the counters and handed the filled out sheet of paper.

Youre studying all that simultaneously? she asked, mildly impressed.

Just trying to keep up with Cheska, Dallion replied, a still smile on his face.

Skilled and prodigies always stick together. The woman laughed. Just a moment, so I prepare your seal.

The fingers of both had hands moved about with the efficiency of a bureaucrat familiar with the ten finger typing method. Dozens of symbols appeared, forming two triple circles which then merged into one single spherical construct.

Seeing the fascination with which Dallion was observing the spell, the apprentice chuckled.

Its not as difficult as it looks, she said, constantly adding new symbols to the mix. Youll be able to do it as well in no time. She glanced at the sheet of paper, as if copying some invisible symbols present there. Just give me your seal hand, please.

Mesmerized, Dallion pulled up his sleeve and reached out. No sooner had he done so, than the woman grabbed the complete spell and pressed it against the back of his hand. There was a moment of sharp pain, as the new pattern of symbols merged with the one already on Dallions skin.

Reacting out of habit, Dallion split into three instances and pulled back his hand.

Its fine. The apprentice kept smiling. Its over.

Dallion looked at the seal.

Youll be able to see the classrooms in question now.

Illusion magic? he asked, in hope.

You could call it that.

How do I get to study that?

Oh, illusions are for apprentices. Focus on learning how to spell first. Once you pass your final test and remove your seal, youll be able to continue in any field you wish, including illusionology and paper magic.

Part of Dallion wanted to shout that he wanted to learn illusions now. The more mature he, though, just nodded, smiled back, then turned around. It would be tough enough learning what was already on his plate.

Muttering a thanks, he left the building, accompanied by Cheska.

Now what? He glanced at her.

Nothing. Classes are in the afternoon.

Dallion was just about to ask what to do in that case when it suddenly hit him. His magic trait was ten, which meant that the library would have a lot of sections that had been invisible before.

Doubling his pace of walking, almost at the point of running, he made his way to the library. Upon entering, he froze, speechless. It was expected that a whole range of books would appear. Dallion was prepared to see a quarter of the books and scrolls to become legible. However, even he didnt expect to notice entirely new sections in the room. Arching doorways were visible where there had been nothing but walls before. Looking at the signs above them, the new sections corresponded with the fields he had chosen to study.

Cool, right? Cheska whispered beside him. It cant compare to the practical demonstrations shown in class.

Before Dallion could answer, a mage in a cyan robe walked up to the two. Cheska instantly looked down at the floor. Dallion made the mistake of looking up. A pair of merciless eyes look back from within a wrinkled, dried-up face.

So, youre him, the mage said. His age was difficult to determine. His skin looked like that of an eighty-year-old. However, his hair was that of someone in his early twenties. You look smaller in person. Wheres your shardfly? I expected to see you with him.

I left Ruby in my room, sir, Dallion replied. I prefer not to agitate him.

While talking, he was desperately trying to figure out whether he knew the mage from somewhere. Instinctively, he wanted to say no, but something in the mans behavior made him feel as if theyd known each other, or at the very least, the mage seemed to know Dallion.

What do you think? The man turned to Cheska. Will he fit in?

I dont think so, sir. Faint fear emanated from the girls very being. Thanks to his music skills, Dallion could tell she feared the mage almost as much as she respected him. Hes acquired a lot of habits from the outside.

You arent afraid that someone might take your spot, are you?

The girl remained silent.

It was a smart move to ask me for a seal pass, the mage continued. You got to experience the outside a bit, and do a bit of work here and there. I heard that youve been busy cleaning sewers.

This was Palags mage. It had to be. Only he was aware of the special arrangement Dallion had made. Put on the spot, Dallion was uncertain whether to thank him, or be angry for not receiving actual payment.

How is the reality chameleon, sir? Dallion probed. I was told that it was a delicate and temperamental creature.

A sudden hardness emanated from the mages face, making it clear that wasnt a topic to be discussed. Not in the open, in any event.

I heard that youll be taking a few of my classes. The mages eyes narrowed. News travels fast in the Academy. You have many interests, almost as many as Cheska. Fail to keep up in any of my classes and youll be kicked out. There was a long pause. See you in class in two hours. He cast a quick spell, fading before Dallions very eyes.

Flashy, Dallion said a few seconds after the man had gone. Is he always like that?

Dont talk about him, Cheska whispered. He doesnt like it.

That bad?

Look, it was easy up till now. Spell casting is on a whole different level. It wont be like with Palag. The mage expects perfection. Mess up

And I get kicked out of class, Dallion finished the sentence. I get it.

No, you dont. Ive been visiting his lessons for a while and he hasnt allowed me to attempt spellcasting once. All he does is tell me what books to read and how to practice.

That sounded a lot like Nil. That meant that the training would be tough, but as long as people showed progress, the mage would open up to them. At least Dallion hoped that was the case. He had already seen the mans merciless side during the capture of the chameleon. Having a repeat of the situation in class was the last thing anyone wanted.

Chapter 684: Spellcaster

You sure you dont want me to join you, boss? Lux asked.

Bringing a bladebow on the first day of class might send the wrong message, Dallion replied. Even so, he tucked the Nox dagger in his boot. Some habits were impossible to kick. Youll be fine here, Ruby?

The shardfly didnt reply.

You can chat with bowl and shield. Im sure theyd like it.

Sure. The insect replied, but gloom and disappointment kept emanating from him.

Okay, be good. Ill try to find a slab of stone for you to draw on. Dallion left the room.

Ruby flicked his wings a few times, then remained still. Despite his loyalty and attachment to Dallion, the Academy didnt seem to be his thing. Despite that, he persistently remained with him. If there was a way for Dallion to transport him into his realm, he would have.

The first two classes Dallion was supposed to have were spelling and echo training. Both took place at the same time, were led by the same mage, and were only a door apart.

Knowing hed have to start with the basics, Dallion peeked in the Echo training room. There were several dozen novices, all of them from previous cohorts, idly waiting for class to start. It was notable that none of them were talking. Leaning at a large desk was the mage Dallion had run into while in the library. Seeing Dallion, the man shook his head and pointed for him to continue along the corridor.

Ten seconds later, to Dallions surprise, he walked into a very similar room though with fewer people which also had the mage standing near the desk.

Uncertain whether his mind was playing tricks, Dallion split into two instances and peeked into the other room. Surely enough, the mage was there as well, each dressed in a completely different fashion. The one in spelling class was wearing a pair of simple black trousers and a large blue loose-fitting shirt, while the other was with a pair of beige trousers, white shirt, and the typical cyan mage robes on top. Both of them looked very real.

Dallion, the mages in both rooms said in perfect unison. Maybe pay attention to your spelling class.

Dallions extra instance faded away as he quickly took a seat on the front row of the spelling class. A few more students entered, after which the mage drew a series of symbols in the air, causing the door to slam shut.

Lets begin, he said, his lips twisting in a grimace. Once again, its that time of year when new faces start joining in. With luck, some of you will finally be able to remove their seal before the next cycle.

No one dared say a word or even look up. Dallion risked splitting into a few instances to look about. The sharp cough on the mages part quickly let him know that any further disruption will not be tolerated.

For the three new additions to the class. Here you'll be learning how to do actual spellcraft. Everything you've done in the past few months is learn a few of the letters of an alphabet. I won't waste time teaching you new symbols or ways to extract threads. You are expected to do that on your own. The things I'll show you will be how to compose spells, starting from the simplest to those of medium complexity.

Medium complexity?

Dallion asked.

Really complicated spells take hours to complete, sometimes more, Nil replied. Although the really long ones are done by pedantic academics who have lost touch with reality.

Im Academy mage Argus Tisaku, the man said loudly and clearly. Do any of you newbies have an idea why your magic trait had to reach ten before you could join this class?

A few rows behind Dallion, Cheska raised her hand.

Yes. The mage nodded.

It's at ten that we acquire the ability to create stable circles, she said with a confident smile.

At ten, the magic trait allows you to create circle patterns. The mage drew a circle in the air using magic.

Even with his high perception, Dallion couldn't see a full magic thread. Rather, it seemed to be a dotted line made out of magic particles that just stood there, like beads in a necklace, connected by some unknown force.

We call it a circle because that's the most solid shape, but we can make any shape as long as we don't go too far. As beginners, you'll start with small shapes. The shape is a frame in which you can put symbols.

He drew the symbol of matter, light, and heat on different parts of the dotted line. Moments later, the circle collapsed, changing into a ball of fire.

This is the basis of all spellcraft, the mage continued. A series of properties and instructions connected in a specific way to create anything you desire.

Chemistry? Dallion wanted to scream. Spell creation is actually chemistry?!

This was precisely what he was hoping to avoid. It made perfect sense, of course, but chemistry wasn't his favorite subject, not to mention that it made him feel uneasy. All the things relating to spellcraft were ominously similar to the processes that formed galaxies and everything in them: from string theory and quantum physics to chemistry.

There are some patterns you'll learn by heart for ease of casting, but for everything you want to create on your own, the principle is that the more complicated the requirement, the greater number of symbols you'll have to use. Any questions? He stared at Dallion.

One, Dallion replied. Originally, he had no intention of attracting attention, but the mage had caught him by surprise. How do people who've lost their magic cast spells?

People who've lost their magic? The mage repeated the question.

Or people who haven't learned the spellcraft skill?

Whispers filled the room. Dallion already regretted opening this topic, but there was nothing he could do about it. Backing out at this point would only make things worse: he'd be remembered not only as a troublemaker, but a coward not willing to finish what he started.

It is exceptionally rare to have awakened the magic trait without the spellcraft skill, Argus said slowly. Should that occur, the Academy will be granted echoes to guide him through symbiotic cooperation. As for someone who's lost his magic the mage paused. through misfortune or stupidity of his own, there still is a way to avoid the consequences.

The mage pulled a thread of magic from the desk, then quickly used it to form a circle with a few symbols inside. A branch sprouted from the wooden surface.

While they no longer have magic of their own, they haven't lost the ability to see and extract magic from existing sources. With a bit of practice, they could still cast spells, although the complexity of such spells is highly limited. Any other questions?

Despite the urge to shake his head, Dallion remained perfectly still and silent.

Good. Now, let's continue with a few examples of basic spells. Who'll give an example?

You had to ask that! Nil grumbled within Dallion's realm. Are you crazy?

I didn't do it on purpose. Dallion protested. It's over now.

You only wish it is. Everyone in class heard you. Even if the mage decided to forget the matter, whispers will spread throughout the Academy. The archmage can hold this over your head from here on. And trust me, he and the other high-level mages will do just that. The moment you do something they don't agree with, they'll suddenly remember this incident and

Can I do anything about it? Dallion interrupted.

Of course, you can't. That's not the point. I just don't want you to give them any further ammunition.

The class continued with examples of simple spells. All of them, without exception, were direct one-circle spells, involving a single circular frame and up to four symbols on it.

After ten minutes of theory, Dallion, along with everyone else, was asked to practice casting a spell in real time. The experienced novices used more complicated frames, of course. Dallion was half tempted to try a two-circle spell to compensate for the mess up earlier, but in the end decided not to skip any steps.

Drawing the frame took a fair bit of practice. Naturally, Dallion did all that in his own realm. Part of him even wanted to combine full spells with potion making. However, Harp didn't seem to be in her tower, depriving him of that option. All that was left for him to cast a simple branch growth spell.

Releasing magic fragments was similar to puffing smoke: one had to work precisely and fast before the elements had a chance of fading away. Once that was done, Dallion quickly drew the symbols, attacking them to the frame. Over fifty attempts were needed for him to do it well enough, and when he did. The entire circle collapsed in on itself, allowing the spell to take effect.

I Dallion said, gasping for air. I did it.

SPELLCASTER

(+2 Reaction)

You have cast your first spell. Remember, its all in the mind and in the fingers.

Quite right. Just one thing, though. There's no need to hold your breath when releasing magic. It won't be affected by air.

Dallion ignored him, rejoicing at his achievement. It wasn't the two points of reaction that he was so fond of, but the title. Being officially acknowledged as a spellcaster brought him the same amount of joy as when he'd become a hunter.

Returning to the real world, Dallion duplicated the spell. The mages reaction was very different to that of Nil. At first he asked Dallion to repeat the spell a few times, then pedantically pointed out everything wrong in Dallion's casting process, starting from his stance, to the arrangement of the symbols on the frame.

Meanwhile, other students toiled with their own spells. Dallion managed to get a glance at Raven from the corner of his eye. The black-haired was far better than expected, drawing the frame and the symbols simultaneously. His particular approach was to use his ring finger to release the particles, while using his thumb, middle, and index fingers to draw the symbols at the same time. It was quite impressive and very efficient to the point that Dallion suspected that one or more echoes were assisting in the process.

By the end of the class, Dallion had managed to cast a total of four different spells, each as useless as the last. In addition to the branch growing spell, he'd also managed to create a small static ball of fire which, unlike the Earth notion of fireballs, had slowly burned up in a matter of seconds an ice cube, and a flash of light. The last had annoyed everyone in class, causing him to refrain from repeating it.

After two hours, Argus cast a spell of silence, bringing class to an abrupt end. The mage then told Dallion a list of books he was to find and learn, and disappeared in a cloud of glowing particles.

Not expecting such a resolution, Dallion kept staring at the spot the mage had been.

Got you, didn't he? Cheska asked, as she passed by. Don't worry, it's just an echo. Mage Tisaku uses echoes to teach the classes, so he dissolves them each time class is over.

Echoes?

Thinking back, Dallion remembered reading somewhere that high-level mages had the ability to create echoes in the real world. That meant if anyone had hit the instructor with a quill or a piece of chalk, he'd have vanished just as he had after class. Of course, doing so would have gotten that same someone in a lot of trouble.

Where to now? Dallion asked.

I'm going to one of the advanced classes, Cheska said smugly. You can go to Improvement Trees.

Show off, Dallion thought.

Where's that? he asked.

It's here, Raven said as he made his way to the exit. It's one of the useless ones, so no one bothers with it.

I visit now and then, Cheska said as the black-haired mage made his way out of the room. Well, good luck. See you in Magical Fauna afterwards. She rushed out as well.

Yeah, Dallion said. Other than him, not a single person had remained. See you afterwards.

Chapter 685: Selective Item Improvement

Minutes passed. Dallion waited for someone, anyone, to enter the room, but there was no such luck. Given that even Cheska had gone off, the class had to be pretty useless. According to Nil, the discipline had to do with using magic to improve items adequately. The explanation had piqued Dallion's interest, although in all honesty he would have preferred to learn more about Echo Training.

After a quarter of an hour, all noise coming from the corridor had ceased. The novices had gone to their respective class, and Dallion was still waiting. Several times he split into instances just to go check if a clone of the mage was approaching along the corridor, and each time there was nothing to be seen. It was only when he started considering leaving, when a yet another version of Argus emerged.

Finally! Dallion got rid of his peeking instance and sat down in the front row, waiting.

Should have guessed you'd be here, the mage said upon entering. You might actually find this discipline useful. Which means you'll assist me with exploring it further.

Yes, sir? Dallion wasn't sure how to respond exactly. He felt equal parts praised and insulted.

Do you know the basics? Argus went to his desk.

Of item improvement? Thinking back, all Dallion knew was that through improvement, items became sturdier and more valuable. There was nothing complicated about it, and definitely nothing magical. Killing the guardian of an item causes it to improve?

That's commoners thinking. The mage frowned. You're a mage now, so you need to think like a mage. Everything that seemed random in the past has rules and magic helps us see those rules and use them to our benefit. Rather to your benefit.

My benefit, sir?

You're the only one who'll bother improving anything in the entire Academy. That's why, with a bit of help on my side, you'll be able to maximize that talent. He tossed a small statue at Dallion.

Dallion caught it with hardly any effort. The object turned out to be a small figurine made of wood/birch, from what he could tell.

That there is a small wooden item with a feral guardian. I know because I selected it. If you defeat the guardian, what will happen?

A blue rectangle will appear, telling me that the guardian has been defeated, and the item has reached a higher level.

Try it. Argus crossed his arms. I'll wait.

Since there was no way to refuse, Dallion entered the realm of the figurine.

ITEM AWAKENING

Rectangles appeared, but Dallion quickly waved them away, focusing on everything around him. The realm was one of those simple room realms he'd seen plenty of when he was starting out. All around him were flawless wooden doors, with a single doorway leading elsewhere. Stepping through led Dallion to a guardian chamber, where a hedgebear was waiting.

Sorry, Dallion said, then performed a point attack.

COMBAT INITIATED

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

STATUE level increased

The statue has been improved to OAK

Three rectangles appeared in immediate succession. That seemed pretty standard. However, looking closely at the last rectangle, Dallion noticed that it wasn't one, but rather a multitude of rectangles stacked into one. Furthermore, with his layer magic vision, Dallion was able to see that each of the rectangles was of a different material. Before he could read all of them, the three rectangles disappeared and Dallion was thrown back into the real world.

I'm back, sir, he said.

How did it go?

No more difficult than I remember it.

Notice anything different about the improvement rectangle?

Yes. There were more than one, but only the top one came into effect.

That's the chaotic nature of improvement. There are several options, sometimes hundreds, for an item to transform into. In most of the cases, the choice is so obvious that it hardly matters. However, that's one of the big lies of the world.

Lie? Dallion felt a slight chill pass through his body.

Not all things that are random should be. Argus went on. In fact, theres an argument to be made that nothing in the world is random, but set up just as the Moons want it to be following their own whims. Even cases that appear to provide apparent logic, there is in fact none. Take metal, for example. When upgrading silver, what do you get?

Gold. Dallion replied instantly.

Why?

This time, there was no immediate answer. It was obvious the mage had asked a trick question, but when thinking about it, Dallion had to admit its validity. There was no rule or principle that said that something made of silver should become gold. It was the peoples preconception that gold, being the rarer and more expensive of the two metals, should follow.

Because we perceive it so? Dallion ventured an answer.

Wrong. Theres no reason for that to happen, none whatsoever, however ninety-five times of a hundred it does. Occasionally youd get someone who transforms it into something completely different. Theres even one documented case of an awakened forger transforming gold into silver. The point is that all possibilities are presented, and thanks to magic, you can decide which of them to choose.

The mage drew a quick spell. A deck of thick cards appeared in his hand.

Think of that last rectangle as a deck of cards. He showed Dallion the bottom card. Thats what its supposed to be improved into the decision of fate and the Moons. However, if you were given the ability to choose, what would you do?

Turn tin to gold, sir.

That was a terrible example to give. The mages eyes narrowed, as disappointment emanated from his very being. Mages considered themselves above trivial things such as money.

I suppose that is one possibility. However, theres one other problem. The man threw the cards in the air. Within moments, they scattered all over the ground. You have one instant to make that decision and put another card in the place of the fated one. Miss your opportunity and

The item is destroyed?

No, the previous choice is made. If it were so easy to destroy items, dont you think mages would be far more feared than they are? Argus released his magic into an air current, using it to gather the scattered cards. Enough theory. I want you to turn that statue into mahogany without using symbols. Just improve it in a controlled fashion.

With that, the tedious process of training began.

If there was a course that felt like weeks this was it. As it turned out, just because Dallion was able to see some of the options of improvement didnt mean he had the ability to select any of them. Even with a hundred instances, the time frame was too short, and Dallion was still unable to pull a rectangle out of place.

After several hundred attempts, he found that extending his magic to grab the corner of the rectangle was the best approach. It took a few more days of training and rest for him to be able to pull it, even a little, before time elapsed. From there on, things gradually became easier.

After a week, Dallion was able to pull any selected rectangle halfway out from the stack. Unfortunately, that did nothing to influence the results. Dallion had initially hoped that the disruption would grant him more time to pull this off. As it turned out, everything that wasn't the chosen rectangle ceased to exist once the decision was made.

It took twenty-three days for Dallion to pull out a complete rectangle and place it on top so as to change the result of improvement. The issue now was that he had chosen a material at random. Going through the entire stack and making a choice came with its own set of problems.

It's impossible, Dallion said, taking another break. Even with instances.

The trick, dear boy, is not to use instances. You think of the stack in terms of infinity and that's why you can never succeed. Cut it down in your mind to more manageable elements and search for them. At first go with two materials, then three, give, and slowly increase the number until you can pick one of a thousand.

Sound advice. Trying to follow it proved a different matter altogether. Regardless of how hard he concentrated, Dallion failed to be able to make a meaningful choice. He could either see a large number of the options or pick one at random, but never both.

Having no regard for himself, he kept on trying and trying, until at one point all the rectangles turned white.

That's new, Dallion thought. Nil, have you seen anything of the sort?

Probably, a familiar voice said. Back when he was a novice. Hello, Dal.

The Green Moon had appeared a few steps away, this time taking the appearance of a doctor complete with a stethoscope. If it wasn't for his green outfit, Dallion would almost believe he had somehow found himself in hospital.

You fainted, the Moon said, Just in case there's any doubt. Even with your stats, one must remember to eat, drink and rest.

Dallion nodded.

No remarks or complaints? The Academy must have treated you well. You've become a lot more understanding for one, though still so stubborn. Do you really need to learn all this? It's useful, but let's face it, you won't become a tinkerer or even a forger.

It's knowledge, Dallion replied. And knowledge is valuable.

Yes, one of your human clichés. All knowledge is valuable, but only if you happen to have an infinite amount of time. While awakening might seem to provide that, it doesn't. I guess you'll learn about that in one of your other classes.

Felygn went up to Dallion.

You still havent resolved your situation, he said, shaking his head as he did. Youre already capped in terms of skills, soon youll be capped in terms of traits as well.

Im working on it, Dallion lied. Why are you so concerned?

Because of whats to come. Defeating the Star caused a vacuum.

And a vacuum is always filled, I know.

You shouldnt be worried about what fills the vacuum, but rather what will be disturbed in the process.

Just as Dallion was about to inquire regarding the meaning of that vague statement, he opened his eyes. Needless to say that he wasnt in the classroom anymore, but rather in his own bed. His immediate reaction was to sit up, but as he found, that proved to be an exhausting process. Every fiber of Dallions body screamed in agony at the slightest motion. Merely lifting himself up felt as if he were benching five times his body weight.

Good morning, dear boy, Nil said, his words dripping with sarcasm. Hope you had a nice night's rest, or three.

Ive been asleep for three days?

Three and a half, to be precise. You made quite the impression. Several mages arent sure if they should praise you for supreme dedication or yell at you for stupidity.

I didnt come up with the exercise.

Only you would think that you have to achieve it on your first attempt! What do you think classes are for? Practicing in your realm has its advantages, but not when you overdo it. If you have to spend more than a day in a realm practicing, dont.

Youve never complained before.

I didnt think youd take it this far. Do you have any idea what it takes for someone with your stats to faint? A lot and yet, you managed to achieve it.

Do I get a prize? Dallion closed his eyes. Right now he needed one of two things: rest or exercise. The issue was that he couldn't decide which one to go with.

In a manner of speaking, though not one youll be pleased with. Due to your dedication in your Improvement Tree studies, Argus has come to the conclusion that any other classes, apart from spelling, would be a waste of your time, thus has removed them from your schedule.

What?

You heard me! The echo snapped back. Now, in order to go to any other classes, you must prove that youre up for it, and the fastest way to do that is by properly improving an item so that it changes according to your will.

Chapter 686: Improving to Quicksilver

The hardest thing to do was to convince a mage that someone was up to the taskany task. As Dallion quickly found out, excellence only received a passing grade. Anything less only confirmed the notion that he should stay stuck to two classes until he could get the hang of things. The really sad

part was that in his current state, Dallion couldnt disagree. He tried to use every trick there was to learn faster, and most of them blew back in his face. Combat splitting proved to be particularly ineffective, despite a brief initial boost. Having to find the right page every few seconds became more distracting than useful.

Training in his realm also didnt provide the boost Dallion expected; in fact, it was expected of him to spend days there training and learning. From a few conversations hed had with other novices, it turned out they were doing the same things.

Then, when Dallion felt that things couldnt get any worse, Phoil became a rank three novice.

Wow, how the mighty have fallen. The large boy grinned at Dallion, repeating words he most likely was told by an echo. How does it feel to be scum?

Ive no idea. Why dont you tell me?

Surprisingly, Phoils expression didnt change. Maybe it was because he didnt have his posse with him, or maybe he had managed to mature a bit, grinding through trials till he upped his magic to level ten. Dallion, in contrast, had focused on other things.

I heard youre the only regular in that improvement thing, he said in a lower voice.

Initially, Dallion thought this was the start of another insult. However, once he noticed there was no spite emanating from the boy, Dallion actually started to pay attention.

Only one there, he said. Cheska used to join from time to time, but she stopped.

Show me.

Look, were about to start class and

The large boy shoved a pin in Dallions hand; thankfully, not with the sharp end first.

Turn that into glass.

Phoil, thats not how it works. I cant transform something into anything. Improvement follows principles like he thought for a moment, wondering how to explain it. Like corridors. If we leave the room, we can only go to another room in this building. I cant take you to a room in another building without

Turn it into quicksilver, then.

Dallions eyes widened. He was deeply convinced that an echo was leading the conversation, but still didnt see the reason or it. They were already creating something of a scene in class. The only reason no one was paying particular attention was because everyone else was too focused on their own problems, revising symbols and spell patterns.

Fine! Dallion hissed. Better keep your eyes peeled, cause Im not keeping it quicksilver for long.

ITEM AWAKENING

Splitting into instances, Dallion quickly rushed in all directions, running through rectangles in the process. Once he saw which instance was heading towards an opening in the wall, he ended the rest and performed a point attack.

COMBAT INITIATED

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

PIN level increased

The PIN has been improved to STEEL

Now came the difficult part. Dallion split into a hundred instances. In each instance, Dallion used his layer vision to extend his magic and pull out a specific rectangle from the infinity stacked up in the stack. After weeks of practicing, he had developed the skill to grasp a specific rectangle even if it was thinner than a strand of hair.

A hundred options appeared before him. Seventy of them were steel, teniron, tenbronze, three tin. Of the seven that remained, most were precious metals. Thankfully, there was a quicksilver one as well.

Dallion selected that instance, turning it into reality, then placed it on the top of the stack.

PIN level increased

The PIN has been improved to QUICKSILVER

Back in the real world, the pin lost form, turning into a blob of mercury in Dallions palm. Moments later. It shifted again, transforming into a blob of silver.

There. Dallion put the pin on the desk in front of him. Happy?

It was a simple exercise, but it was still extremely exhausting. On the positive side, he didnt faint this time.

Wow, you really can pull it off. For the first time since Dallion had known him, Phoil seemed amazed. Just as he was about to add something more, an Argus clone entered the room. Class had officially started.

Since there was a new face, the mage gave Dallion the honors of reciting the basics of spelling. Dallion did so begrudgingly, after which he did a simple spell demonstration. Of course, he was corrected several times by the mage, who always found something that displeased him.

Following that, the man went on to give out individual tasks. Phoil, as a rookie, was told to perform single circle spells. Dallion was focusing on doing three-circle spells along with most of the rest. Cheska and a few others were tasked with attempting spells with five circles. One thing that Dallion had quickly learned was that it was always better to keep his distance from everyone else during spelling. Practical experimentation was a mix between physics and chemistry where everyone was given free reign to play with the really dangerous toys. Mishaps were common. Sometimes spells just fizzled out incomplete, but in other instances the novices themselves proved unprepared to deal with the effects, causing a spell to fly loose.

Alright, your two hours are up, the Argus-echo said. Next week, I want everyone but Phoil to be able to cast at least two four-circle spells. Dont worry about efficiency or type of spells, yet. Youre still building up stamina.

Novices started to leave the room.

Dallion, you stay.

Great, Dallion thought.

The first time the mage had asked him to stay, Dallion was under the false impression that hed be praised, possibly even told he could take more courses. However, as it soon became clear, being asked to stay was only done only when Argus had harsh criticism.

Your magic is still at twelve. The rest are leaving you behind.

I dont have enough time, mage. Dallion replied, his voice sounding squeakier than usual. The trials are easy. I can complete them without effort.

If you havent done it up to now, then they arent easy! Argus snapped all of a sudden. Youre focusing on what you shouldnt and ignoring whats obvious.

Dallion wanted to grit his teeth. Were all mages like this? This sounded like Nil at his worst. It had taken decades for the old echo to finally start to treat him as something more than an idiot. Was the same amount of time needed for Argus as well?

Level one vortexes can only bring you to twenty. After that youll have to find your own means to boost up.

Wasnt twenty the point at which I become an apprentice?

You think that the magic level is all it takes? Disappointment emanated from the mage-echo. Thats the bare minimum. You cant even cast a five-circle spell, let alone create one of your own. Your casting method is barely adequate, your planning is laughable, and youre still using gimmicks to control item improvement. Need I go on?

He has a point, dear boy, Nil agreed. Youve been focusing so much on impressing him that youve let yourself be overtaken. Soon enough, all your previous classmates will become rank three. What will you do, then?

The reason Ive kept you from entering other classes is because I wanted to give you time to improve steadily. Youve done nothing of the sort! My gift has been wasted! And while you can claim that youre the best in the very narrow field of improvement magic, thats nothing to boast about. Not unless you want to end up working as a tinkerer for some noble or return to being a hunterboth abysmally bad options.

Abysmally bad? Dallion wondered.

The standards at the Academy were definitely high. In the rest of the world, hunters were treated as minor nobility. Here, they were viewed as less than servants.

Get out of here. There will be no other classes today. Get some rest, eat, spend some time in the library, do whatever you need to do to get your head straight. Then, starting tomorrow, I expect you to start doing things right.

The Argus-echo gave Dallion one final look, then faded out of existence in a cloud of purple particles.

Easy for you to say, Dallion thought. Youve been familiar with magic since your awakening!

Splitting into a dozen instances, Dallion slammed onto the nearest desk with twelve of them, then took them out of existence and left the auditorium. Hed already had planes, but after the talk, he didnt feel like doing any of them. His first instincts were to go to his room or the library. Thats why he went to the dining hall instead.

At this time of day, the room was completely empty. Everyone else was either in class or in the library. Taking advantage, Dallion went to the old champion table and sat down. Things were going differently than he had expected. After his conversation with Karka a while back, he had been left under the impression that hed grown a lot faster once he reached the stage to cast spells. It turned out to be the opposite. There was no denying he was among the best when it came to making spell circles. He had also learned an impressive number of magic symbols. However, there always seemed to be something missing. It was as if he was rushing up a ladder only to find that the final step was missing, then fall back down again.

Tough day? a familiar voice asked.

Glancing at the entrance, Dallion saw Raven standing there.

You can say that. The mage is driving me crazy.

I think everyones noticed that. The black-haired made his way to Dallions table. Just like theyve noticed, youre his favorite.

Yeah, right.

There probably are two mages in the entire Academy that can do what you can at item improving, and hes not one of them. So, what if you use weird methods?

Are you trying to cheer me up? Dallion asked. By now, he knew that Raven didnt do anything without a reason, even being nice or rude.

Im trying to help you focus your concentration, he said. Remember the thing we talked about? Well be doing it tonight.

This night tonight? Dallion fought the urge to jump up. Why didnt you tell me until now?

Youre not the only piece in the puzzle. I was waiting for something. Theres also another reason. The challenge hall isnt the only place you can boost your magic. Theres one more place.

Dallion didnt like where this was going. Creating mischief in a mage school always sounded like a good idea in theory, but actually doing it came with serious consequences. Dallion had already been shouted at several times for doing precisely what was expected of him. He could only imagine what awaited him if he was caught doing something he wasnt supposed to.

I know where they keep the vortex cubes. We can go there now. No fuss, no rules, no requirements. You can go through ten of those if you want to.

Are you insane? Dallion split into instances just to check if anyone wasnt listening at the door outside. Stealing artifacts?

Its not stealing. Youll be using them. And its not like theyll be missed. With this many novices, no one can keep track. Itll be no different from doing the trial the official way, just faster. Besides, well only get in trouble if were caught.

This was more than a dare, it was a test. Despite the lack of emotions emanating from Raven, Dallion knew that his participation in the alliance might very well depend on his answer.

Id advise you to be careful, Nil said. While what hes saying isnt incorrect, its not an approach I would take.

But hey, if youre unsure, we can go ahead as you are not.

No, Dallion quickly said. Lets do it. A boost or two will show that old goat whos got a low magic trait.

Chapter 687: Magic Boosting

It wouldnt be the first time that Dallion had snuck through the corridors of the Learning Hall. As long as he vaguely looked like he knew where he was going, no one else seemed to care. Venturing into a mages section was a different matter entirely.

The novice section building he and Raven were to enter was located on the crossroads of two main corridors. From a logistics point of view that made sense: it was convenient to the mages and apprentices and at the same time, as far as possible from the novices.

What about Palag? Dallion whispered as he and Raven walked casually towards their destination.

What about him?

A fury will catch me. Even with my trait levels, I wont be fast enough to fool him.

Really? There was an untypical moment of childish disbelief in Ravens voice. Either way, hes in a meeting with mage Tisaku, the real one. Itll be hours before hes anywhere close.

You mean theres no one guarding the cubes?

That sounded suspiciously easy, and as experience had shown, when something was too easy, it usually wasnt.

Nope. Theres an apprentice or two, but even they dont stay in there all the time. As long as you can work a lock, were good to go.

So thats what it is, Dallion said to himself. The black-haired was using him to get something from inside. No doubt it was something he shouldnt get. Then again, every alliance had its cost. As long as it was something innocent, Dallion could go along with it. If it wasnt he'd have to make a new alliance.

Hey, Dallion said as they approached the building. He could sense the guardian of the lock. That was a good thing if there was a guardian, he could be reasoned with. Are you locked?

Yaa? the lock replied.

The accent was stranger not one Dallion had heard before. Regardless, the guardian seemed curious, which was always a good sign.

Are you locked? Dallion asked, using his music skills to create a sense of calm and understanding.

Yaa, am. You're an empath?

Yeah, a rarity I know

There's another one at the Academy.

Dallion almost froze mid-step. There were supposed to be a handful of empaths in the world. Excluding dragons, there were supposed to be no more than three in the empire. The chances of Dallion coming across one of them were extremely small unless the Green Moon had lied to him.

Oh? Is he here now? Dallion casually asked.

Not for a while. Maybe a month.

A month? That means he'd been here when Dallion had arrived at the Academy. There was a real chance that the two of them had crossed paths. In that case, why hadn't he felt anything? More importantly, why hadn't Felygn said something?

Pity. If he comes to visit, can you tell him I'd like to chat with him?

Yaa, the guardian replied.

Also, can you unlock and let us in?

Sure. The lock clicked without delay. That was one of the advantages of having to deal with an item guardian who had been isolated from the rest of the world. Probably no one at the Academy had tried to sneak through him, so he wasn't particularly bothered about letting people in. After all, everyone here was a mage. If a mage wanted to keep something safe, they could use spells to do so.

Here goes, Dallion whispered to the Raven, as he opened the door and stepped inside.

The building was every bit the bureaucratic nightmare as one might expect. Tidiness wasn't a wizard's trait, apparently. There were piles of paper everywhere, racks of poorly arranged scrolls, and quite a few doors and staircases leading Moons know where.

This way. The black-haired took the lead, going up a wooden staircase, then through the second door on the right.

Dallion had no choice but to follow, taking special care to pay close attention to everything his classmate did. The two then went down a short corridor, then through another door. There, Dallion knew they had reached the right place.

Wow, he said. The space was as large as a warehouse and completely filled with large box-sized purple crystals. There probably were hundreds of them, patiently waiting to be used.

Impressive, isnt it? Raven asked. All these will be used up by the end of the month and replaced by more.

Where do they get them from?

They make them here. No idea how. The Academy really wants to train mages as quickly as possible, as thoroughly as possible.

Didnt use to be like that, Nil sighed. Back when I was active, patience was a far greater virtue. Now, its considered a weakness. Everything is a rush just for the sake of it.

Youre sounding like an old man, Nil, Dallion added some humor to the situation. Deep inside, though, he was a lot more worried than the echo. Considering everything going on in the world, he could only think of one reason why the Academy would need skilled mages quickly.

We need to create an open space, Raved said. Vertex cages crashing into each other isnt a good idea. How do you know all that?

Privilege comes with knowledge.

Thanks to a few spells and a bit of physical effort on Dallions part. A space was set up in minutes. Without wasting time, Dallion grabbed the nearest cube and placed it in the middle of the cleared area.

Will you have a go? Dallion offered.

No. You go. Ill keep an eye to make sure everythings fine.

Sneaky. While Dallion was inside, hed be too busy paying attention to his trial to focus on anything Raven was doing.

Be as fast as possible. The twenty-minute limit is still in effect. And dont worry about splitting. Its a different realm inside.

Thanks for the tips.

Extending some magic to the palm of his hand, Dallion

VORTEX CAGE LEVEL 1

The familiar purple rectangle appeared, followed by a second one.

You are in a VORTEX CAGE.

Defeat the guardian to ABSORB the vortex.

You have 20 minutes before the VORTEX becomes too weak to absorb.

At least it was a guardian this time. Summing his harpsisword, Dallion split into instances.

COMBAT INITIATED

Barely had he done so, when a purple leopard emerged from the floor itself, and slashed at one of his instances, creating several deep scars. Several red rectangles stacked up, but that wasnt the worst

of it. Moments before the instance faded away, Dallion noticed that the scar marks were forming symbols.

VORTEX GUARDIAN - AETHERCLAW

Species: STATICARD

Class: MAGIC

Health: 100%

Traits:

- **BODY 0**
- **MIND 20**
- **PERCEPTION 20**
- **REACTION 40**
- **MAGIC 40**

Skills:

- **SPELLCRAFT**
- **ATTACK**
- **ATHLETICS**
- **CARVING**

Weakness: NONE

For the briefest of moments, Dallion was impressed. This was the first time he had seen a magical creature with the carving skill. Seeing how it combined the two, it had to be pretty fierce. However, its lack of speed was its major weakness.

Dallion infused his weapon with magic. More instances emerged, half of them charging at the creature. In one or two cases, the staticard managed to evade the attacks, but far from all.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

AETHERCLAW has been defeated.

A pair of rectangles appeared as the harpsisword ripped through the creature, bringing it to an end. Without a doubt, as cunning as vortex guardians were, once one learned their tricks, they were pretty much like echoes, at least for someone with Dallions skills.

The walls, floor, and ceiling of the vortex cage unraveled, turning into threads that darted straight at Dallion. This time, he didnt even hesitate, extending his own magic throughout his left hand to grab them.

MAGIC ABSORBED

Your MAGIC trait is now 13

Not bad, right? Dallion asked.

However, Raven was no longer there. Given that a few minutes at most had passed since Dallion had entered the vortex cage, this was more than concerning. He was just about to go out of the corridor and see what was going on, when the black-haired suddenly emerged from behind a stack of crystal cubes.

Everything fine? Dallion asked.

Yeah? Why?

You were gone. I thought something had happened.

Just arranging stuff. Nothing serious. It was an obvious lie, but not enough for Dallion to confront him. After all, he had put himself at a disadvantage by being here. Are you going for more, or stopping at one?

How much time do we have?

Id say half an hour, at most. You never know whether a random apprentice drops by to hide away from actual work.

Right. Dallion forced a smile. Lets go, then.

The next two challenges were as easy as the first. In fact, the fights were so brief that Dallion wondered why he hadnt done this earlier. It was quite lucky that in all three of the cases, he had guardians to face. That made up for every challenge he had outside of the storage room, where he was plagued with riddles, each more annoying than the last.

After increasing his magic trait to fifteen, Dallion decided to stop. He felt that hed only tempt fate by pushing on. Three levels were nothing to sneeze at more than enough to impress his mage instructor, and also to give him a boost for tonights challenge.

Why are you stopping? the black-haired asked. Weve got plenty of time. You can do a few more.

Na, this is fine. I dont want to get stuck in a stupid riddle.

Are you sure? Raven didnt sound at all happy. You can always break the vortex if you get a riddle and pick another.

Hey, its fine. Fifteen should be enough for the challenge, right?

Might be a bit close. I really think you should do at least one more.

Seriously? Would one make that much of a difference?

Were relying on you and Cheska for the heavy lifting! Raven admitted, on the verge of shouting. Please, do more. If we mess this up, we wont get a second chance. This isnt something we can just restart on.

Theres more to this, Nil said.

Obviously. Do you think he wants to keep me occupied while he does something?

Thats always a possibility, but I think youre the focus of this. I suggest you go for it.

Any reason for your sudden change of heart?

Im just curious to see if the next two challenges would be vortex guardians. Oh, and let him choose which ones to pick.

Two more, Dallion said, firmly. After that we go.

Right. Relief was written all over the black-haireds face. Two more is fine.

As Nil had predicted, the next challenge turned out to be another creature. The following one, as well. The chances of that happening were the same as getting heads on a coin toss five times in a row not impossible, but extremely suspicious.

The benefits were obvious. Now Dallion had his magic at level seventeen: not bad for an hours work. If someone had told him this was possible before, hed consider it cheating. It was tempting to think that everything was due to his superior skills and long experience as a hunter, but it would be a lie.

You could try to go for twenty, Raven suggested in his typical cold fashion.

Better not push it.

Your choice. He turned towards the door. Lets go.

Raven, Dallion said. Why didnt you try to gain a few magic levels? As you said, we have time. Id have broken the cage if it turned out to be a riddle.

The noble stopped, then looked over his shoulder.

Because only you can manage that. Youre different. Your magic is different. No one will say it openly, but you were exceptional even without being an otherworlder. The only way for you to have acquired the magic trait at your level is for the Purple Moon to have intervened. And if thats so, it means he has plans for you. Im just one of those that want to take advantage of the fact and be along for the ride.

Chapter 688: Moon Magic

Boosting five levels of magic felt like drinking a ton of energy drinks. The first thing Dallion wanted to do after he and Raven rushed out of the vertex cage storage room was to get a nap before tonights challenge. However, that was the least thing he could do. The increased magic felt more like adrenalin. Dallion tried to spend the pent-up energy in his realm, but even after getting exhausted, his stamina would rebuild in a few minutes, bringing him to the same restless state hed been before. Apparently, the magic trait granted fast stamina recovery something Dallion had experienced just now.

After a few hours, Dallion tried taking advantage of the fact by attempting one of his three remaining trials. The boost in magic and spell knowledge was quite the boon, but sadly, the result was the same. After half an hour of intense fighting, Dallion lost the trial. It was exactly as Nil had said: Dallion spell knowledge had caught up to the trial echos skills during their last encounter. However, the opponents new abilities had vastly outstripped Dallions ability to catch up, ten circle sphere spells to change reality itself.

The whole thing was almost laughable, considering that Dallion had defeated the Purple Moons familiar. Yet, that only showed how powerful the Star had been in effect. The sad truth was that while Dallion had definitely moved on from being a weakling, there were beings vastly stronger than him.

When the fight against the trial echo failed to calm him down, Dallion decided to stop with his attempts to fall asleep and went to the library. A whole lot of sections had become legible now, including a few philosophical books regarding the nature of the Moons. Grabbing them, Dallion started reading.

It started mostly as an exercise to waste time, yet soon turned into more than that. From what was written, there had been a number of instances in the past in which a person had been granted magic at a whim. In most cases, that was the Purple Moon being random. However, in a few cases the aetherbird had done so as well. The common theme, though, was that according to the leading philosophical school of thought at the time, people who'd gone through this were believed to have the Moons' own magic which was different from the one granted to them through standard awakening. The belief was that this type of magic was superior in the sense that it could bypass a few additional restrictions, including such as placed by the Moons themselves.

Nil, Dallion whispered. Is it true?

Is what true? The echo feigned ignorance. A lot was said in those books. And let's not forget that philosophy is true from a certain point of view. Most of its pretentious crap, anyway.

When Aether created the trait, did he grant me Moon magic?

All magic is Moon magic. That's the whole point. SO, yes, he did grant you Moon magic, just as
Nil

Yes, your magic might be considered different. The echo signed. It's not like that's as significant as you think. All those claims of directly bestowed magic being superior to other magic are questionable at best. True, there have been mages who've accomplished phenomenal feats, but there are also instances of complete failures that have received

What's the difference?

Excuse me?

What's the difference between normal magic and Moon magic?

Well, that's pretty much it, dear boy. One was granted directly by the deity, while the other was earned the standard way. That's all. Your magic isn't stronger, or further reaching, nor does it grant you the ability to perform unique spells. All that about it not being subject to limits is completely made up and based on observation. More correlation than causation, if you'd ask anyone.

Anyone?

Well, every now and again there are scholars who seem to believe that theyve found proof of some major difference. Think of it more than them hedging their bets. You have eleven skills and the knowledge to use them. Its natural theyd want you, and if the Moon magic superstition turns out to be true, all the better.

Youre saying theres no difference?

There is one, a melodic combination of sounds came from Dallions domain. Harp had joined in the conversation. Purity.

There was a long moment of silence during which neither Dallion nor Nil reacted.

Whats purity?

Magic is like energy, she continued. Its also like metal. Ultimately, its like water. The purer it is, the more it slides, ignoring any resistance. All magic can slide, people can rarely see any difference. But sometimes there will be circumstances in which low-purity magic will stick and only the purest will slide through.

Out of habit Dallion thought of an Earth example. Making direct comparisons was getting more and more difficult, but it sounded like the magic a person was given had the qualities of a conductor, in addition to everything else. If that were the case, then he was a superconductor.

Even if thats the case, it doesnt matter, Nil said after a while. Spell effects arent affected by magic. As long as all the symbols of the spells are complete and properly arranged, the spell will still be the case. Reaction speed is far more important in that case.

Harp didnt argue. It was entirely possible that her magic was different from the ones used in this era. Dallion remembered Aspan telling him that magic had changed significantly throughout the ages. Maybe in the past, purity had a far greater importance. Then again, it was also possible that the challenge involved something that was from the past.

Knowing what to search, Dallion scoured the library. It took a while, but he finally found a few scrolls talking about magic purity. To little surprise, the scrolls were a reference to an older nymph work. Brushing aside the poetic form and questionable history accounts, it was said that there were riddles that only a pure key of Moon magic could unlock. Normally, Dallion would have discarded the whole thing as crap, but his scholarly skills kicked in, spotting the linguistic pattern. To be precise, he didnt spot it, but rather translated the quotes in the text to the original language, then spotted the pattern.

As it turned out, high purity magic provided a huge advantage when making potions, but also when forming symbols. If the scroll could be believed, not all symbols could be done by everyone. Long ago, before the modern approach to magic, spells were more like unique designs that encompassed all. Every spell had to be remembered separately, even in cases where the difference wasnt large at all; a small fireball would be different from a large fireball. And among the designs, there were certain spells that could only be cast by people with higher purity magic.

Things were a lot different from symbol combinations. Spells were likely less elegant, but mages were able to customize them on the fly rather than having a limited number of ready solutions. However, if purity was linked to the ability to create patterns with magic, did that mean there might be symbols that only Dallion and others like him could create? If so, that gave Dallion a huge advantage, even if it wouldn't be made apparent right away.

Inspired by the prospect, Dallion tried to find any other mention of difficult symbols, but to no avail. All the really complicated ones were still illegible, set for apprentices only. Dallion was given only the option to learn basic symbols, same as every other novice. It was annoying knowing that the learning system put in place by the academy to make things easier for Dallion was the precise thing giving such a hard time.

Nothing like a light read? Cheska's familiar voice came from both the left and right of Dallion. For anyone else, this would be confusing, but thanks to Dallion's music skills, he could tell exactly where she was standing and turned in the appropriate direction.

Hi, Cheska. Learning some new tricks?

Guess that was too easy to catch you? There was a mild whiff of disappointment coming from the girl, though not as much as Dallion expected there would be. Finished reading?

Almost. Why?

It's time to eat. If we don't get our food, we'll be starving for the night.

Dallion's reaction was to refuse. However, he was fully aware of what she had in mind. The invitation wasn't coming from her, but from Raven. This could well be the first time that the entire group would be in the same place.

Isn't it a bit early? Dallion asked.

Instead of replying, Cheska looked intently at Dallion's chest.

Five levels, she said, nodding as she did. A few more and you'd have caught up?

Caught up to you?

Yep. You know we're both fighting for the position of star pupil?

The phrase almost made Dallion choke. It was a perfectly reasonable question, but too soon after his fight with the Star.

I thought I was lagging behind.

In magic, definitely. In class, though. You're almost as fast as me and if you had boosted your trait earlier, you'd know twice as many symbols. Now, you'll have to copy what I'm doing.

Copy?

Haven't you been in a group while exploring the realms? Cheska appeared confused.

Right, Dallion said to himself. It was possible to group together. Gloria had taught him this, and the Icepicker guild had shown him the benefits. People in a group shared awakened markers, not to mention that combination attacks received bonuses. Cooperating while using other skills also was beneficial.

Unfortunately, Dallion had ignored that, relying on the skills of his minions and familiars.

Hunters work alone, he lied. Don't worry, though. I pick things up fast.

Lets hope so. Well be the tip of the spear. Twin spears.

Dallion narrows his eyes. Hed give a lot to have Lux with him right now. Without a doubt she had a new echo in her realm and it was pretty easy to tell whose.

Lets go. Dallion took the books and scrolls he had borrowed. Returning them quickly to their places, he then joined Cheska, and they went together to the dining room.

On the surface, the atmosphere there was no different than usual. With classes over, everyone was therethose that had no classes had decided to take a break from reading and training. At the same time, Dallion could sense a cluster of determination coming from the far side of the room. Two people were seated there: Raven and a short, common-looking girl. Thinking back, Dallion believed she was one of those who were impressed by him succeeding in his task back when he was a rank one novice. The girl wasnt remotely memorable. He didnt even remember when she had reached rank three, although it hadnt been much later than himself.

Concentrating, Dallion focused his magic vision on her. He was trying to determine the level of her magic trait by looking at it. Instead, a purple rectangle emerged, displaying the values of all her skills and traits.

Not expecting this, Dallion froze for a moment.

What happened? Cheska asked.

Nothing, Dallion lied. I just remembered something.

Hed wondered how mages were able to tell the value of his traits. Initially, he thought that was an ability that appeared when his magic trait reached twenty. As it turned out, it was far sooner.

Theyre both level fifteens? he asked. The rectangle vanished as he said it.

Useful, isnt it? Nil asked. Its the little things that give a huge advantage.

Dallion almost said he didnt think it would work in the real world. Then he remembered that magic thrived on exceptions.

Thats enough for support. Cheska replied.

Concentrating on her, Dallion found that she had her magic trait at nineteenone before shed be able to become an apprentice.

The two got some food, made their way to Ravens table.

Ready? the black-haired asked directly, skipping the small talk.

You know it, Dallion replied. Iksa? he turned to the girl beside Raven. Never thought youd be here.

I knew you would. She glanced at him, then at Cheska, then looked down at the table. Both of you.

Prodigies and hunters are difficult to hide, Raven said. So I didnt bother.

Whos the fifth? Dallion took a gulp from his cup. If nothing else, the fruit juice at the Academy kept being one of the best things hed ever tasted.

Behind you. Raven said.

Both Cheska and Dallion turned around, looking over their shoulders.

You must be joking! Dallion thought.

Chapter 689: The Request

Hey. Phoil grinned. An annoying smugness emanated from him, drowning all other sounds that Dallions music skills were able to detect.

Without any regard for the rest, he sat down on the table, leaning on it with both elbows.

Him? Dallion turned to Raven. Seriously? Him?!

Dont make a scene.

If it were anyone else, people would be staring at the commotion, but given that they caused a scene more frequently than not, the other novices had come to view it as something normal. Even Cheska was known to cast a spell at a whim, making people stay away from her.

Sorry, Im having trouble seeing how he and best are in the same sentence, Dallion said beneath his breath.

Everyone has a use, Raven replied. Its not about the value of the individual piece, but the combination of the whole.

Whose are those words exactly? Dallion wanted to ask. At the same time, he knew it would turn out someone too important to piss off.

You should see your face, Cheska smirked. You look like youve just

Are all of you ready? Raven interrupted.

Ill need to get a few things from my room, Dallion said. Other than that, I am.

Okay. Well pass by your room first. Everyone else?

Ive got something in my room too, Phoil said. Its similar to his.

Can you get it yourself? The change in tone was noticeable.

Sure. Ill get it, then meet up with the rest of you.

After that, well go to the great mage and start this.

In a place such as this, chances were one in a thousand, yet something made Dallion feel a tingle of fear after hearing that.

Great Mage Enroy? he asked cautiously.

Who else? The black-haired stared at him. Hes in charge of the novices.

Enroy was in charge of the notices as much as a noble was in charge of weeping the streets. Dallion had no doubt that the mages title wasnt for show, but so far, the only time hed seen him was once hed made a mess of things by entering a magic artifact.

The bad news was that Enroy was part of the otherworlder mage group the same Dallion had dealings with, almost exclusively unpleasant. That wasn't the reason he felt uncomfortable. Since Enroy was from Earth, he could think like Dallion and potentially make the challenge more difficult. In that regard, Dallion still had no idea what exactly the challenge was, and by the looks of it, neither did anyone at the table. It would be difficult, no doubt, and required spellcasting otherwise there wouldn't be a requirement for challengers to be rank three. Other than that, though, it could be anything from having a game of skill in front of a panel of mages, to defeating a strong beast in a small vortex.

Dinner was finished in silence. Once everyone was done, the group stood up and made their way outside. Phoil rushed ahead to get something from his room, while everyone else accompanied Dallion to his room.

Normally, he'd be reluctant to allow them to enter, but given that he'd transform back into his adult self once in there, he was tempted to let them in just for the fun of it.

Will I be able to bring pets? Dallion turned towards Raven, but the real people he was asking were the echoes in the black-haired's domain.

I'm not sure, Raven said after a while. Go for it. Better safe than sorry.

Safe for whom? Dallion wondered. Still, he did offer Ruby the opportunity and, to little surprise, she accepted. Of course, there were also a few grumbles regarding the promise of a slab of marble.

Getting his combat equipment, Dallion stepped back into the corridor. He must have looked ridiculous carrying oversized weapons, for everyone cracked a smile even Raven, which was generally rare.

Got everything? Cheska snorted.

No. I can't wear my armor.

That would have been funny.

Just then, Phoil emerged, rushing along the corridor. Given that their rooms were mostly in the same area, it was somewhat suspicious that he'd taken so long. He too was carrying a weapon, and to his credit, not something Dallion had seen.

The world had presented a vast variety of weapons, some more exotic than others. Phoils happen to be in the slightly weird category. It had a rather unique shape three blades attached to each other, forming the emblem of Mercedes but was made of high-quality iron-silver alloy, indicating it wasn't anything high powered.

You brought that? For a moment, Cheska sounded almost impressed. Can you even fight with it?

What is it? Dallion asked.

A triblade, Nil replied. The poor mages weapon. When I say poor, I mean from the point of view of a mage. There was a time when only mages could make weapons suitable for them. This must have been one of those obligatory

heirlooms. Some ancestor had probably put his blood and soul into making it. Centuries ago, it would have been outright impressive. Yet, as you know, mages are really bad at item creation. Even those lucky enough to have forging skills werent able to create much.

I know what Im doing, Phoil saidan almost certain indication that he didnt. Did you get everything? he glanced at Dallion.

Everyone has everything, Raven said in a harsh tone. Lets go see the great mage.

Enroys office happened to be in an entirely different section of the building. It stood to reason that hed been somewhere at the center, near the administration and the rest of the important mages. That didnt make walking there all the less embarrassing. A group of children walking in areas they werent supposed to be carrying weapons definitely attracted a lot of attention. In other circumstances, people would be worried that someone was planning a coup. But since this was the Academy, the event didnt create any emotions beyond mild interest and curiosity.

Youll do the talking, I take it? Dallion asked Raven.

Who else? Dont worry, itll be fine. All of us are pretty important, so theyll listen to what we have to say.

If only things worked out that way in the rest of the world, Dallion thought. Even in welcoming places, there were barriers preventing the less skilled from interacting with the skilled. Being related to an Archduke was definitely the good life until someone tried to take his title.

The mages building was visible from afar. For one thing, it was the only ivory one in the corridor, located a hundred feet from a small blue palace. There were no signs or indications, but there was no doubt that it had to be the apprentice administration building.

Not in the least bit phased, Raven walked straight into the Enroys building. Dallion and everyone else followed.

Id like to speak to the great mage, the black-haired said in an apparently empty room.

The architecture was markedly different from anything Dallion had seen in this world. If he didnt know better, hed say someone had taken the foyer of a fifties theater and transported it here. The only thing that was missing were the posters and the popcorn machines.

A tall apprentice emerged at the top of the grand staircase. Unlike most of the other apprentices around, he didnt seem exhausted and rushed, but rather dignified, dressed in a light gray outfit that complimented his dark skin tone.

A Lanitol mage? Dallion wondered.

There are other cities where people have that complexion, Nil reminded. But yes, hes from there and related to the Archduke.

Whys he here, then?

Because he belongs to the Academy now. Mages are not allowed to take sides, only defend themselves directly when attacked. If he were to take Archduke Linatols side, can you imagine the chaos that would follow? Everyone with mage relations will be called back to lend a hand on their side, which will start an all-out mage war.

You better have a good reason, the apprentice glared down at the children. He, too, was used to authority.

Were here to request a trial of skill. Raven stood his ground. We must do it in person.

Very funny. The apprentice crossed his arms. For several seconds, no one budged a muscle. You're serious?

Yes.

The mage requested not to be disturbed, so whatever this trial is, it'll have to wait

Before he could finish, the main door on top of the staircase swung open, and Enroy emerged. He was wearing an interesting set of silk and sapphire clothes, which despite the expense of the materials involved, had the appearance of work clothes.

You're actually invoking that old thing? The man's face was wrinkled in astonishment. Do you even know what it involves? No, don't tell me, Enroy quickly added. I don't want to know. He glared at Dallion.

For some unknown reason, Dallion felt that he was blamed for something he didn't have a hand in.

All five of you? the mage asked.

Yes, great mage. Raven nodded.

And just when I thought I was done with the paperwork. Lhia, tell administration I need Archmage approval for a trial.

The confusion and disapproval in the apprentice's glance was visible all the way from the entrance. Even so, all he could do was nod and do as he was told. As he passed by Dallion, a momentary wave of hatred erupted from within him, before being quickly concealed.

He doesn't like me much,

Dallion said.

You're the pawn that started a war between people he knows and possibly cares about. It's natural that he'd hate you. I'm sure Countess Priscord doesn't like you either.

Both of them still hate me?

That's the luxury of remaining neutral. Or, to be more precise, of remaining neutral after working for both sides.

I did jobs for them, which weren't in any way related to the wars.

They don't see it like that. You helped one side reclaim a devastating weapon and found the phoenix for the other. Worst of all, you refused the invitation both of them extended your way. Well, maybe in the case of the countess, there are other issues as well.

That hardly made any sense, but Dallion kept his guard up. Even the lowest apprentice at the Academy was a lot stronger than him at present.

Wait there. The mage disappeared behind the doors.

Several minutes passed. Everyone knew better than to discuss things in the open, especially in a mages home. Yet, even an army of echoes couldnt stop a childs nature entirely.

What do you think hell do? Phoil whispered. Have the trial here, or take us to some ancient and forgotten part of the Learning Hall?

The entire building is ancient and forgotten, Cheska chuckled. Hes probably preparing the trial item.

Mages dont keep Moonstones with them, Raven hissed. Only the Purple Moon can make that.

Well hold the trial on the Purple Moon? Phoil asked.

This was a question Dallion was curious to hear the answer to. Not that he believed it to be true, but he wanted to see how Raven would handle it. Fortunately for the black-haired, Enroy emerged once more. This time, he was wearing his official robe, which automatically made him look a lot more important than before.

One final time, youre sure about this? he asked. That wont be your common trial. All of you could get hurt.

Just hurt? Dallion asked.

This is a trial, dear boy, not a gladiator show. The Purple Moon wont give out gifts without merit, but he wont punish those trying to obtain them.

So, will it be on the Moon?

The trial? Or course not. At least not entirely. Youll see in a while. Dont let me ruin the surprise.

Were sure, Raven said.

Individually. I want to hear each of you say it.

Im sure, Cheska said almost instantly.

Dallion followed along with everyone else. He couldnt sense any music of magic at play, but he was pretty sure they had all just made a Moon vow. There was no turning back now. Whatever challenge awaited them, theyd have to see it through, or get hurt trying.

Chapter 690: Moon Realm

The outside of the building had changed considerably since Dallion last saw it. Over a dozen buildings had been destroyed, deep pits surrounded by scaffolding taking their place. What was weird, though, was how little everyone cared. Looking at the buzzing mess of people, one would say the Academy had always been like this. The only difference was the presence of the White Eye, who seemed to be out in force, flying over the city in groups of two.

So, this is why my pass was revoked? Raven asked.

A huge inconvenience, Im sure, the mage muttered.

The strength of the black-haired's father was leaking through. If Dallion had said such a thing, he'd get lucky to get off with a stern warning at the very least. When dealing with an Archduke's son, Mage Enroy sounded almost apologetic in a passive-aggressive way.

As it turned out, the trial was indeed a rather big deal. While Great Mage Enroy had the power to request it, formally it was the Archmage who needed to sign off. He had, of course, after which Enroy had the annoying task of taking the group to the place where the trial was to take place.

A large carriage, similar to the one Dallion had been brought here, but a lot longer, waited for them a short distance from the Learning Hall.

Get inside, the mage said.

He'll be driving us? Dallion asked.

He's the lowest ranking person that could, so yes, Nil replied.

Harsh.

That's the thing about mages: they always do the least amount of work possible. Otherwise, why bother learning magic? The old echo let out a dry laugh. The only thing mages want to focus on is their work and a lot of comfort.

One by one, all five novices entered the carriage. Dallion was last since they were no longer in the building, he had grown considerably. On his shoulder, Ruby flicked his wings.

You take a lot of space, Phoel grumbled.

From his perspective, Dallion was a small child who'd temporarily grown large. The funny thing was that to a degree, Dallion had started to think of himself in the same way. That only reinforced the idea that he had to get rid of his mark as soon as possible.

Looks like you could have taken your armor, Cheska said. Would have given us an advantage.

You really think they'd allow that? Dallion leaned back. The trial will be considered Learning Hall territory or something. It's just for novices, after all. And even if it isn't, I'm sure that great mage Enroy would oblige.

He will, Raven said with absolute certainty. We'll be exactly the same as we are in class. No advantages, other than weapons and personal items.

Did you bring any of those?

All eyes fell on Raven.

Maybe, maybe not, he replied. I have something better than weapons, though knowledge.

Knowledge of a centuries old trial? I'm guessing the Purple Moon might have changed things a bit since then.

That's unlikely. If something's not broken, why fix it?

It was an innocent answer that sent shivers down Dallion's spine. What the rest of the group saw as witty and amusing, he saw as a confirmation that somewhere among Raven's echoes was one from

Earth. Only a human would use that phrase. Was this the persons way of letting Dallion know? It was always possible, but if that were the case, who was it? Otherworlders were said to be found in large numbers in the Imperial capital. All of them couldnt help but be drawn to one another, always going towards the unknown and the most advanced spot in the world, and the capital was the peak of the current age. There was talk of other kingdoms, even human ones, that rivaled the empire. However, anyone with logical thinking could tell even they considered it superior otherwise it would be said that the empire was rivaling them.

Could that be the reason that Raven had approached him for an alliance? As an otherworlder, he had one ability that the others lacked. Either way, it would become clear soon enough.

It took roughly twenty minutes for the flying box to reach its destination. Given the speed that flight was capable of, that meant the trial ground was quite far off from the familiar cluster of buildings.

A slight thump marked the landing. Based on the sound, Dallion could tell they had landed on stone. He was just about to mention it when, abruptly, he shrunk to his child state.

This is it, Raven whispered. Be ready for anything.

The wagon door creaked open.

Come along, Enroy said.

Quickly, everyone went out. Dallion had no idea what to expect, though it definitely wasnt finding himself on the top of a tower. The carriage had landed a few feet from the end, revealing a wide empty space with nothing but six columns staring towards the sky. In some aspects it reminded Dallion of an awakening shrines realm. Instinctively, he looked at his shoulder. Ruby was still there, indicating that they remained in the real world.

Straightened up, Enroy said in a strict voice. We have an audience.

Mages and carriages made their way to the opposite side of the tower. Unlike what Dallion had come in, the other carriages were elegant things of beauty. One was of special interest, created entirely of gold alloy. Two mages acted as attendants, opening the door and assisting an aristocrat in her thirties to descend. Her hair was somewhere between hazel and blond, flowing down almost to her waist. The clothes were simple, made of the same material as the carriage: a long elegant Earth-like dress with the top of a business suit. The blouse was flawlessly white, made of silk improved so many times that it had become elevated to something that shouldnt even exist.

House Elazni, Nil said. Quite a big shot has come to watch you.

Is she royalty?

You can say that. They are the descendants of the first emperor. More importantly, theyve retained their position, unlike many others. Other than the current emperors household, they are as imperial as one can get.

Trying not to openly stare, Dallion followed the rest to the center. The moment they reached the columns, the mage stopped.

You know what to do, right? The man looked at Raven.

The black-haired nodded.

Explain the trial, the woman in gold said. She didnt raise her voice, but there wasnt anyone who didnt hear her.

Of course, Duchess, Enroy said with a deep bow.

Duchess, Dallion wondered. Not Archduchess.

The term felt almost foreign. Never had he heard such a title since arriving in this world.

The trial you are about to experience is given to you by the Purple Moon himself. Once you are within the columns, the passage to a real will open up. To succeed in the trial, youll have to cross it, making your way deeper and deeper until you find the means to leave. Should you succeed, the Moon will grant you with a prize worthy of your skills. Should you lose, youll return to where you stand now and will have your magic level reduced by five.

As far as punishments went, that was quite serious. That explained why only level three notices got to make the challenge. Anyone with magic five or less ran the risk of ceasing to be a mage. On the other hand, the prize had to be quite the boon, to be considered the equivalent of five magic levels. Maybe it would be enough to end Dallions curse?

What if one of us doesnt make it? Dallion asked.

He expected the mages face to twist in rage, but the man didnt react. There was no frown, no smirk, not even a sigh.

If someone dies in the realm, but the rest of the group complete the trial, only one magic level will be lost. Needless to say, that person wont get a Moonstone.

That seemed perceptively fair. In truth, it put pressure on everyone elsea trick Dallion had experienced in some of his awakening trials. The Moons were definitely wickedthen knew exactly how much to press to press a person to keep them striving forward, but not quit.

Everyone took their places. When the last one stepped between the columns into the designated area, it happened. Purple barriers emerged, transforming the columns into a cage. The sun also vanished, eclipsed by the giant Purple Moon shining directly overhead. It was so close that Dallion felt it would mode down further and crush them.

MOON REALM AWAKENING

A purple rectangle appeared in front of his eyes. Dallion split into instances, each summoning a weapon. Every instinct in Dallions body yelled for him to summon Lux. Just as he was about to, he noticed Ruby still on his shoulder.

Thats not right. Dallion paused.

Looking around, it was obvious he was no longer in the real world. Purple fields and forests continued for as far as the eye could see. The rest of the group were there, and so was Ruby, but also, Dallion was able to summon his harpsisword at will.

Everyone, dont move, Dallion ordered. The problem was that despite his strength and reflexes, he remained in child form and with a squeaky voice.

Calm down. Raven looked at him with a blank expression. Nothing will happen to us. The starting area is safe.

Starting area? Cheska asked. She was almost as jumpy as Dallion, already having cast two protective spells. Spheres of green and blue light surrounded her.

Like in any area realm, theres a starting area. This one is safe.

Starting areas come with descriptions, Dallion said as he looked around. Nothing here.

Theres always an exception. Raven narrowed his eyes.

Of course, there is.

The whole realm was one big exception. It allowed elements from the real world to enter, yet also followed the standard rules of a realm.

I dont see any threads, Izka said, feeling the ground.

Theres nothing but threads, Dallion corrected. So many that you cant see them.

Spellcraft and attack, he thought, drawing the light symbol on the ground. Initially, the entire area beneath his feet lit up, but after a few seconds, the glow began to fade, leaving one single magic thread lit up.

It was just like the vortex cage Dallion had been in. There was no certainty that the thread led to the right destination, but at least it was a start; the start of a puzzle. Rather convenient. Or rather, expected. The trials in the Learning Hall were nothing more than practical lessons, leaving novices to learn what they were lacking. No doubt each was specifically selected depending on what the specific novice required.

Dallion looked at Raven. Could the noble have known? When he had taken him to the storage area, he had never specified that it was the only one. It was perfectly possible that all the cubes held guardians.

What now? Dallion asked. You have the most knowledge. What do we do?

We follow the thread. Raved went forward.

Just like that?

I told you the starting area is safe. Its just to see whether were smart enough to figure it out. The challenge will start afterwards.

And youve no idea what that challenge is?

Raven paused for a second, then kept on walking.

I cant say unless you know about it already.

Restriction rules, Dallion grumbled. And just when I thought I had gotten rid of them.

Always on guard, and splitting into half a dozen instances, Dallion went on forward. Despite everything, it was going to be a lot safer for everyone if he were in the lead. Cheska was a close

second. She had no weapons, but her spellcasting skills were dangerous enough. Raven followed, keeping a safe distance further behind, with the remaining two on either side of him. Of them, only Phoel was armed.

Two casters, two fighters, Dallion thought. But what are you exactly? With so many echoes, it could be anything

Just then, the glowing thread shot up from the ground like a laser beam.

COMBAT INITIATED